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Rome

Film revives row over Pius's war role

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Rome—The film version of a book by an American author has resuscitated controversy over Pope Pius XII's role in the closing years of World War II.

The film, "Massacre in Rome," based on the book, "Death in Rome," by Robert Katz, 41, relates events leading to a bomb attack by Italian partisans, on German SS troops in Via Rasella on March 23, 1944, and the reprisal that followed 24 hours later.

In a particularly cold-blooded procedure, the Germans rounded up 335 hostages, mostly on racial and religious grounds or trumped-up charges, and shot them, five at a time, in the Ardentine Caves on the outskirts of the city. They then sealed the entrances to the caves with explosive charges, leaving inside two huge mounds of bodies, many with their knees still flexed from kneeling for execution.

Both the book and film, which was co-scripted by Mr. Katz, suggest that Pope Pius was informed of a forthcoming reprisal, but allowed political prudence to outweigh all other considerations.

Msgr. "Alberto Giovanetti, the current Vatican representative to the United Nations in New York," Mr. Katz said this week, "indicated in his book that the Germans had threatened a review of their attitude to certain negotiations if the Vatican intervened."

The publication of "Death in Rome" in January, 1967, provoked a storm of criticism from the Vatican, coming as it did just three years after Rolf

Hochhuth's famous play, "The Deputy," which accused Pope Pius of silence in the face of the Nazis' mass extermination of European Jewry.

This time, however, the late Pope's niece, Countess Elena Rossignani, 58, has brought a libel charge against Mr. Katz; Yorgo Pan Cosmatos, who directed the film; Carlo Ponti, who produced it, and Richard Burton and Marcello Mastroianni, who play the roles in the film of an SS officer and a priest.

If the case goes to trial, it could set a sensational legal precedent. For the court would have to pass judgment on Pope Pius XII, the first time in history that a secular court has been called upon to pronounce on the actions of a Pope.

Mr. Katz said that he welcomed "the opportunity to see this thing through. I have not sought to defame anybody," he added. "All I'm doing is a recording job."

The Brooklyn (N.Y.) born author said he stood on his position, which he based on research of the available documentation including an article in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, and on personal interviews.

He said that evidence indicated that Eugene Dollman, the representative of Heinrich Himmler, the SS chief in Rome during the war, told a Vatican liaison official and trusted aide to Pope Pius, the Rev. Pankratius Pfeiffer, after the bombing, that a reprisal was imminent, although he did not know the details.

The German asked for papal

intervention to prevent "the sword of Damocles," as he later described it, from dropping on Rome.

But the Pope, wrote Mr. Katz, apparently decided "not to intervene, to remain silent during the massacre and to react to it with great caution."

"I've always left it open-ended," Mr. Katz said, "because . . . I did not have a signed confession from the Pope. But the way the evidence goes, it's a legitimate conclusion . . . that he knew and he did not act."

Mr. Katz conceded that "it was remotely conceivable that the Pope was kept in the dark by his closest aides about the events unfolding that tragic day . . . [just as] we have the example of the President of the United States remotely, conceivably being kept in the dark by his closest aides about certain momentous events now under discussion."

Katz ready for challenge

The New Yorker said he was quite ready to review his position should the Vatican provide further evidence.

"It is well-known that Pope Paul, who was then Monsignor Montini, was one of Pius's close collaborators," Mr. Katz added, "and that he kept notes of anything of importance. . . . Now either he should open his archives or somebody should . . . and let's see who's right."

Instead, "in 1965, when I was researching my book, the Vatican declared it would respond to my [request for research facilities] within a 48-hour period," Mr. Katz said. "No such reply was ever given, in spite of repeated requests."

"In 1967, on publication of my book, the Vatican publicly declared that it would disprove what it called my 'vicious lies' within a few days," he added. "No such proof was ever offered."

"Finally, in 1973, with the release in Italy of the film 'Massacre in Rome' and its imminent release in New York, the Vatican is still issuing denunciations, innuendoes and distortions without a shred of evidence to support them," Mr. Katz continued.

The Most Rev. Federico Alessandrini, the official Vatican spokesman, brusquely refused to comment on the latest developments, except to say, "I was working in the Vatican in that period . . . and what has been said by that American gentleman and what has been said in the film is a lie. This is my personal experience."